

Companion study to 2016 report on freshman motivation/completion

2016 Report: Motivation of Adult Learners for Completing a College Degree

Study identifies motivational barriers to college completion for incoming first-year students ages 25 and older

As they begin taking classes, most incoming adult learners express a strong desire to complete a degree, but many also harbor concerns and attitudes that reduce their motivation and put them at risk for attrition. This report explores a wide range of these noncognitive, motivational attributes that influence completion. The study is based on a national sample of 5,000 first-year adult learners who filled out a 74-item, college completion risk survey in 2014 or 2015 at 50 colleges and universities across the United States.

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Strong desire to finish college

Incoming adult learners in this study began their first year highly motivated to complete their education, as shown in the table below.

Proportions of incoming adult learners in agreement

SAMPLE FINDINGS (See all in Appendix)	OVERALL	MALE STUDENTS	FEMALE STUDENTS	FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS	NON-FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS
I am determined to complete my program of study.	98.4%	97.8%	98.7%	98.3%	98.4%
I'm prepared to make the sacrifices needed to reach my educational goals.	94.4%	93.5%	94.9%	94.6%	94.3%
I do not regret the decision to continue my education.	93.7%	92.6%	94.3%	93.9%	93.6%

Highlights from the data

Overall, the vast majority of incoming students ages 25 and older were united in their strong desire to finish their education, including their willingness to make sacrifices needed to attain their educational goals. Note, however, the variances by sector and gender. For example, female students indicated higher degrees of commitment to completing a degree compared to male students.

Takeaway

Students' desire to complete college is at its highest point as the first year begins. This strong desire should be channeled into intentional learning opportunities and interactions because the peak term of attrition follows soon after¹ (see page 4—attrition breakdown by term). Note, however, that motivation is multi-faceted, so to develop an informed strategy, it is important to dig further into the data.

About this study

Find information about this study in the back of this report:

Respondent profile—page 13

Survey methodology—page 16

Invitation to conduct a motivational assessment of adult learners—page 16

¹ Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2015). *Student retention indicators benchmark report*. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Ruffalo Noel Levitz. Retrieved from www.RuffaloNL.com/BenchmarkReports.



Dread of coursework/Sample of college completion barriers

Already at the beginning of their first year, some incoming adult learners expressed doubts or concerns about taking college courses.

Proportions of incoming adult learners in agreement

SAMPLE FINDINGS (See all in Appendix)	OVERALL	MALE STUDENTS	FEMALE STUDENTS	FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS	NON-FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS
I dread the thought of taking so many courses.	21.6%	22.0%	21.3%	22.0%	21.3%
I wonder if my courses are worth all the time, money, and effort I put into them.	22.2%	24.3%	21.1%	23.1%	21.8%

Highlights from the data

Overall, 22 percent of incoming adult learners indicated they "dreaded the thought of taking so many courses." Notice again the differences between male students and female students.

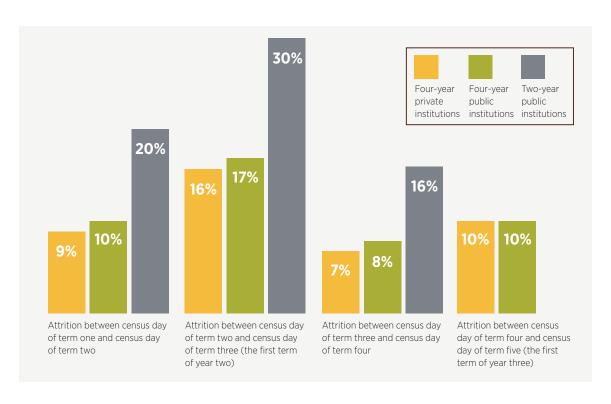
Takeaway

Identifying incoming students' apprehensions and concerns is the first step to addressing them. For example, by knowing which students were dreading their course loads, campuses that participated in this study were able to take immediate action to establish relationships with those students and help them identify strategies to balance expectations for studying with demands outside the classroom.



Attrition rates for first-year and second-year college students

Statistics from a separate, recent Ruffalo Noel Levitz study² show college student attrition continues throughout the first four terms:



Highlights from the data

As shown here, undergraduate attrition peaks between census day of term two and census day of term three (second set of bars shown). Note that attrition in year two, shown in the last two sets of bars, is less than attrition in year one, but remains substantial. The statistics shown above for first-year attrition are generally in line with national retention rate data from ACT. ³

Takeaway

Like motivation, attrition changes over time. Hence, we recommend that institutions develop a first through fourth term college completion plan to address the substantial attrition that continues to erode enrollments.

² Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2015). *Student retention indicators benchmark report*. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Ruffalo Noel Levitz. Retrieved from www.RuffaloNL.com/BenchmarkReports.

³ ACT, Inc. (2015). National collegiate retention and persistence to degree rates (Iowa City, Iowa: ACT, Inc.), p. 3.



Closing the gap between students' strong desire to finish and completion rates

Additional motivational barriers to completion for adult learners appear in the following table.

Proportions of incoming adult learners in agreement

SAMPLE FINDINGS (See all in Appendix)	OVERALL	MALE STUDENTS	FEMALE STUDENTS	FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS	NON-FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS
I often have difficulty putting my thoughts and ideas into words.	34.3%	29.5%	36.9%	35.8%	33.5%
Math has always been a challenge for me.	50.9%	42.7%	55.5%	52.7%	50.0%
I would like to talk with a counselor about getting financial assistance.	49.7%	49.1%	50.0%	53.7%	47.5%
I would like to receive instruction on how to improve my test-taking skills.	57.8%	53.8%	60.0%	62.0%	55.6%
I want to improve my reading skills.	48.8%	52.8%	46.7%	51.2%	47.6%

Highlights from the data

These data illustrate the merits of digging further into the motivational attributes of specific populations. **Red** = the most substantial differences between populations.

Italicized items = examples of incoming students' desire to address specific barriers. See more examples of students' desires to address specific barriers in the Appendix, in sections titled "receptivity."

Takeaway

To close the gap, it is critically important to keep identifying specific needs among specific subsets of students and identify ways to address those needs. At the same time, what needs do you notice are widely shared across groups? Interventions must work on both levels. One key piece: Make sure that career planning services are available to incoming students! See more recommendations on the next page.

As stated earlier, it is important to take advantage of incoming students' strong desire to finish. Capitalize on their deep motivation at the beginning of college by guiding them to available resources to address their needs.



Ruffalo Noel Levitz recommendations for action

Based on the data, here are some recommendations.

Motivation is multi-faceted and must be understood in the context of the different populations of students on college campuses. Some over-arching themes, however, appear to be relevant across populations:

- Study the concerns of incoming students. Institutions cannot assume that a strong desire to complete a
 college degree means that incoming students will stay on track. Collecting—and using—data that identifies
 which students are bringing specific concerns as they enter an institution empowers campus leaders to
 work with those students to address student concerns using available resources.
- 2. **Make career counseling appointments for incoming students**. While many adult learners are coming into college with strong indications of their career directions, others are eager for help in this area. This points to the critical importance of focusing advising and counseling on career and educational planning—helping students develop a big-picture plan and then executing that plan to ensure timely college completion.
- 3. Introduce study skills resources during orientation programs and continue marketing these resources throughout the first two semesters of the adult student's enrollment. Help incoming adult students understand the resources available to them to develop their study skills and academic talents, but make sure to continue to market these resources specifically to adult students throughout their enrollment. Have online resources readily available, too, for adults to access from their homes or places of employment. In addition to helping adults improve their math and writing skills, assess their reading levels and provide reading development support as well.
- 4. **Identify at-risk adult learners who are being reported through your early-alert systems for targeted follow up**. Designate who will respond to the early alerts being reported on adult learners. In many cases the challenges adults are facing are different than traditional-aged students and putting the right person in touch with them may make all the difference.
- 5. Keep working on affordability for continuing students. Financing their education continues to be a concern to enrolled adult learners and their families. While institutions should be justifiably concerned about managing their financial aid awards, they must also be concerned with making the best use of awards to not just influence first-time enrollment, but continued enrollment as well. Creating opportunities for students to work on campus, developing completion grants and additional grant and scholarship programs for continuing students, containing the escalating costs of books and learning materials, and providing ongoing financial counseling and literacy programs are some of the additional strategies being used to help more students afford to not just start their degrees but complete them in a timely manner.



Adult Learner Enrollment Strategy Analysis

Ask for an on-campus enrollment analysis from Ruffalo Noel Levitz focused on adult learners or other high-priority student populations. This fully-customized review provides you with the opportunity to:

- Uncover enrollment opportunities to grow and/or shape your student body.
- See how to leverage fiscal, human, and technological resources to increase recruitment and retention.
- Create a roadmap of possible improvements to existing services, practices, and plans.

Call toll-free at 800.876.1117 to request your enrollment analysis, or email ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com.



Appendix with complete findings

This section includes students' responses to all 74 items in the study, including a profile of the student respondents with additional findings.

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Complete findings—proportions of incoming adult learners in agreement

ALL SURVEY ITEMS:	OVERALL PERCENTAGES	MALE STUDENTS	FEMALE STUDENTS	FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS	NON-FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS
Commitment to college					
I am determined to complete my program of study.	98.4%	97.8%	98.7%	98.3%	98.4%
I'm prepared to make the sacrifices needed to reach my educational goals.	94.4%	93.5%	94.9%	94.6%	94.3%
I do not regret the decision to continue my education.	93.7%	92.6%	94.3%	93.9%	93.6%
I wonder if my courses are worth all the time, money, and effort I put into them.	22.2%	24.3%	21.1%	23.1%	21.8%
I dread the thought of having to take so many courses.	21.6%	22.0%	21.3%	22.0%	21.3%
Taking courses is not the best use of my time right now.	3.9%	4.7%	3.5%	3.6%	4.0%
Attitude toward educators					
Most educators respect students and treat them fairly.	82.1%	79.7%	83.4%	82.7%	81.7%
Most educators are very caring and dedicated.	77.1%	74.5%	78.6%	77.0%	77.2%
Educators tend to have a superior attitude toward students.	20.0%	20.8%	19.6%	21.1%	19.5%
Most educators are more concerned about themselves than their students.	6.1%	6.9%	5.6%	6.4%	5.9%



Green Numbers = greater contrasts between male and female students

ALL SURVEY ITEMS:	OVERALL PERCENTAGES	MALE STUDENTS	FEMALE STUDENTS	FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS	NON-FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS
Reading habits					
I get a great deal of pleasure from reading.	58.2%	48.6%	63.5%	58.0%	58.4%
I only read serious books and articles when I have to.	28.5%	31.3%	27.0%	29.3%	28.1%
Reading has never been one of my favorite pastimes.	28.3%	35.1%	24.5%	29.6%	27.6%
Study skills					
I am able to balance my schoolwork with obligations at home and work.	70.4%	68.3%	71.6%	69.9%	70.7%
I have developed a solid system of self-discipline that helps me keep up with my studies.	62.2%	63.2%	61.7%	61.5%	62.6%
I generally prefer to study alone.	57.7%	53.3%	60.1%	56.5%	58.4%
I find it very helpful to participate in study groups.	44.0%	45.9%	42.9%	45.6%	43.1%
I get so uptight when I study for an exam that I have difficulty concentrating.	29.2%	24.3%	31.8%	30.8%	28.3%
I often feel unprepared for my course assignments.	17.7%	17.0%	18.1%	20.4%	16.4%
Math skills					
Math has always been a challenge for me.	50.9%	42.7%	55.5%	52.7%	50.0%
I have always enjoyed the challenge of trying to solve complex math problems.	33.3%	40.4%	29.4%	33.7%	33.1%
I have difficulty applying even simple math concepts.	22.3%	16.5%	25.5%	24.8%	21.1%



Green Numbers = greater contrasts between male and female students

ALL SURVEY ITEMS:	OVERALL PERCENTAGES	MALE STUDENTS	FEMALE STUDENTS	FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS	NON-FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS
Verbal skills					
Learning new vocabulary is easy for me.	69.2%	69.9%	68.9%	68.2%	69.8%
It is easy for me to figure out the deeper meaning of written material.	63.0%	62.2%	63.5%	60.1%	64.6%
I can write a clear and well- organized paper.	56.1%	52.0%	58.4%	54.9%	56.8%
Speaking in front of others makes me uncomfortable.	49.4%	39.9%	54.7%	50.9%	48.6%
I often have difficulty putting my thoughts and ideas into words.	34.3%	29.5%	36.9%	35.8%	33.5%
Use of technology					
I find the Internet to be a useful learning tool.	92.4%	92.9%	92.1%	91.7%	92.7%
I use a computer to assist me with everyday life and learning.	65.4%	63.9%	66.3%	63.7%	66.4%
I seldom rely on the Internet for finding information.	18.6%	17.9%	18.9%	19.9%	17.8%
I have a weak understanding of how to use computers.	16.9%	16.5%	17.1%	18.0%	16.4%
Life and career planning					
I have found an occupation that interests me.	84.9%	82.4%	86.3%	83.9%	85.5%
I would choose the same career, even if my life circumstances were different.	68.4%	63.4%	71.1%	69.3%	67.9%
I have a career action plan that guides my studies.	51.3%	51.4%	51.2%	50.9%	51.5%
I fear that my career choice will not pay enough to support the lifestyle I want.	18.1%	18.1%	18.1%	18.9%	17.7%
I am very confused about what occupation is right for me.	17.5%	18.2%	17.1%	19.4%	16.5%



Green Numbers = greater contrasts between male and female students and between first-generation and non-first-generation students

ALL SURVEY ITEMS:	OVERALL PERCENTAGES	MALE STUDENTS	FEMALE STUDENTS	FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS	NON-FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS
Personal support					
My family encourages me to pursue my education.	86.2%	86.6%	85.9%	82.0%	88.4%
My family understands and respects my feelings about most things.	79.6%	79.1%	79.9%	77.9%	80.5%
Family problems often distract me from my studies.	20.3%	18.8%	21.1%	21.8%	19.5%
My family does not understand the time I need to spend on my studies.	1/5%	13.6%	19.4%	21.3%	15.3%
Sense of financial security					
I am able to manage my finances without having to work more hours.	46.9%	47.9%	46.4%	44.9%	48.0%
Financial problems are not likely to interfere with my studies.	43.8%	45.9%	42.6%	42.8%	44.3%
My financial obligations are very distracting.	29.9%	29.1%	30.3%	32.5%	28.5%
Receptivity to academic assistance					
I need help to improve my math skills.	69.7%	64.6%	72.5%	69.8%	69.7%
I would like to improve my writing skills.	69.6%	71.1%	68.7%	70.9%	68.9%
Tutoring would benefit me in one or more of my courses.	66.1%	62.6%	68.1%	68.3%	65.0%
I would like to receive instruction on how to improve my test-taking skills.	57.8%	53.8%	60.0%	62.0%	55.6%
I need help improving my study skills.	51.7%	50.9%	52.2%	55.5%	49.8%
I want to improve my reading skills.	48.8%	52.8%	46.7%	51.2%	47.6%
I need help to improve my computer skills.	37.2%	38.6%	36.5%	39.4%	36.1%



Green Numbers = greater contrasts between first-generation and non-first-generation students

ALL SURVEY ITEMS:	OVERALL PERCENTAGES	MALE STUDENTS	FEMALE STUDENTS	FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS	NON-FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS
Receptivity to career planning					
Getting information about the qualifications for various careers would be helpful to me.	80.4%	83.0%	79.0%	81.0%	80.1%
I want to know more about the salaries and opportunities for various careers.	56.1%	58.7%	54.6%	57.4%	55.4%
I would like to learn how to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of various careers.	42.5%	46.1%	40.5%	43.6%	41.8%
I need help selecting a career that is right for me.	22.5%	25.0%	21.1%	25.0%	21.2%
Receptivity to financial guidance					
I would like to talk with a counselor about getting additional financial assistance.	49.7%	49.1%	50.0%	53.7%	47.5%
I need to learn how to manage my finances, including loan and credit card debt.	46.2%	42.9%	48.0%	47.1%	45.7%
I would like to talk with someone about the pros and cons of getting a student loan.	25.5%	26.9%	24.7%	25.7%	25.4%
Total number of students	5,311	1,888	3,423	1,824	3,487
Average age of students	34.5	33.6	35.0	34.0	34.8



Respondent demographics and additional findings

The following data are for incoming adult learners who completed surveys in 2014 and 2015.

RESPONDENT INFORMATION	OVERALL PERCENTAGES	MALE STUDENTS	FEMALE STUDENTS	FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS	NON-FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS
Number of respondents	5,311	1,888	3,423	1,824	3,487
Percent of respondents	100.0%	35.5%	64.5%	34.3%	65.7%
Age					
25 to 34	59.9%	64.9%	57.1%	62.8%	58.4%
35 to 44	24.0%	21.4%	25.4%	23.8%	24.1%
45 to 54	12.8%	10.4%	14.1%	10.0%	14.2%
55 to 64	3.1%	3.1%	3.1%	3.1%	3.2%
65 and older	0.2%	0.2%	0.3%	0.3%	0.2%
Racial/Ethnic origin					
American Indian	4.0%	4.0%	4.0%	4.2%	3.9%
Asian	1.4%	1.4%	1.5%	0.9%	1.7%
Black/African American	28.8%	25.3%	30.8%	27.9%	29.3%
Hispanic or Latino (including Puerto Rican)	8.3%	8.6%	8.1%	11.8%	6.5%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.4%	0.3%	0.4%	0.3%	0.4%
White/Caucasian	50.7%	52.3%	49.8%	49.2%	51.5%
Prefer not to respond/missing values	6.3%	8.1%	5.4%	5.7%	6.7%
Marital status					
Single	65.6%	67.2%	64.7%	68.9%	63.8%
Married/domestic partner	32.9%	32.2%	33.3%	29.6%	34.6%
Widowed	1.0%	0.2%	1.5%	0.9%	1.1%
Prefer not to respond/missing values	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%	0.6%	0.4%
I support dependents in my household					
Yes	63.2%	50.1%	70.4%	66.3%	61.6%
No	36.8%	49.9%	29.6%	33.7%	38.4%
Enrollment status					
Full-time	65.4%	68.6%	63.6%	66.6%	64.8%
Part-time	34.6%	31.4%	36.4%	33.4%	35.2%



RESPONDENT INFORMATION	OVERALL PERCENTAGES	MALE STUDENTS	FEMALE STUDENTS	FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS	NON-FIRST GENERATIO STUDENTS
Level of employment					
Full-time	40.7%	41.1%	40.5%	39.9%	41.1%
Part-time	19.7%	17.6%	20.9%	19.7%	19.7%
Not employed	39.6%	41.3%	38.6%	40.4%	39.1%
Working hours					
0 (I have no plans to work)	19.5%	19.0%	19.8%	20.3%	19.1%
1 to 10 hours per week	6.4%	5.2%	7.1%	6.4%	6.5%
11 to 20 hours per week	15.0%	13.9%	15.7%	14.5%	15.3%
21 to 30 hours per week	16.4%	16.7%	16.2%	17.4%	15.8%
31 to 40 hours per week	30.9%	28.7%	32.1%	30.4%	31.1%
More than 40 hours per week	11.7%	16.5%	9.1%	11.0%	12.1%
Self-reported academic performance					
An 'A' student	16.4%	15.5%	16.9%	14.3%	17.6%
A 'B' student	53.4%	50.2%	55.2%	53.6%	53.3%
A 'C' student	26.5%	29.6%	24.7%	28.6%	25.3%
Less than a 'C' student	3.7%	4.7%	3.1%	3.5%	3.8%
First generation					
Yes	34.8%	32.8%	35.9%	94.8%	0.0%
No	63.4%	65.3%	62.3%	0.0%	96.6%
Prefer not to respond/missing values	1.8%	1.9%	1.7%	5.2%	3.4%
Program of study					
Associate degree	61.6%	59.5%	62.8%	60.6%	62.1%
Bachelor's degree	23.8%	24.9%	23.2%	24.3%	23.6%
Master's degree	1.5%	1.7%	1.3%	1.5%	1.5%
Doctorate or professional degree	0.8%	0.4%	0.9%	0.9%	0.7%
Certification (initial or renewal)	7.4%	7.4%	7.4%	7.2%	7.5%
Self-improvement/pleasure	1.0%	1.5%	0.7%	1.4%	0.7%
Job-related training	1.8%	2.5%	1.4%	1.7%	1.8%
Prefer not to respond/missing values	2.2%	2.1%	2.3%	2.5%	2.1%



RESPONDENT INFORMATION	OVERALL PERCENTAGES	MALE STUDENTS	FEMALE STUDENTS	FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS	NON-FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS
If I could choose, I would complete most of my studies:					
Online	35.0%	31.7%	36.9%	34.1%	35.5%
On campus	57.0%	60.3%	55.1%	57.9%	56.4%
At a site in my community	6.2%	6.4%	6.0%	5.8%	6.4%
At a site outside of my community	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%	0.3%
At my employment site	1.2%	1.1%	1.3%	1.3%	1.2%
Through correspondence courses	0.2%	0.1%	0.3%	0.4%	0.1%
Current educational plans					
To complete this course/this term	11.7%	13.1%	10.9%	12.4%	11.3%
To complete a degree/program at this institution	78.7%	75.1%	80.6%	78.7%	78.6%
To take courses to transfer to another institution	9.6%	11.8%	8.5%	8.9%	10.0%
Previous credit					
Previous college credits earned	23.8%	18.9%	26.6%	22.6%	24.5%
Learning from military training	2.2%	5.2%	0.6%	1.9%	2.4%
Learning from prior job or life experiences	5.1%	5.5%	4.9%	5.3%	5.0%
More than one above	3.7%	4.9%	3.0%	2.1%	4.5%
Other	3.5%	4.1%	3.2%	3.8%	3.4%
Not applicable	61.6%	61.3%	61.7%	64.3%	60.1%
Timing of enrollment decision					
A few days before classes began	8.7%	9.7%	8.1%	8.7%	8.7%
A few weeks before classes began	36.5%	37.6%	35.8%	37.2%	36.0%
Many months before classes began	54.9%	52.8%	56.0%	54.1%	55.3%



About this study and the 74-item survey

During 2014 or 2015, 5,311 incoming adult learners attending 50 colleges and universities across the United States revealed their personal, motivational barriers to completion on a 20-minute, 74-item, college completion risk survey, the College Student Inventory™, Form C, of the Retention Management SystemPlus™. A profile of the student respondents appears on pages 13-15. Students filled out the survey during orientation or within their first weeks of classes.

Immediately after students completed the surveys, findings were reported electronically to the respondents' college or university for early identification of students at risk and early interventions. The aggregated findings for each institution, along with the findings for individual students, supported the development of each institution's first-year programming for adult learners and helped to prioritize academic support services and student success interventions for specific subgroups and specific individuals. In addition, the findings were nationally aggregated to produce this report.

Identify incoming adult learners who are at risk by conducting a parallel, motivational assessment

Readers of this report are invited to conduct a motivational survey of their own incoming adult learners using the same early-intervention approach described above. See sample copies of College Student Inventory, Form C at www.RuffaloNL.com/CollegeStudentInventory. Using the findings, faculty, administrators, and student success professionals can immediately address incoming adult learners' specific strengths, weaknesses, needs, and concerns.

Because attrition continues beyond the first term, additional motivational risk surveys are available for administration to students at the midpoint of the first year, and as the second year begins. Using the findings of these surveys, educators are able to engage students in timely conversations and proactively connect students with key services that make a difference.

Call 800.876.1117 or email ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com to discuss your interest in motivational assessment with a student retention specialist.

About Ruffalo Noel Levitz

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